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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000129

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO/PDAS WARLICK  
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH CODEL SMITH, D.M MURR SAYS SYRIA  
WILL NOT SACRIFICE HIZBALLAH OR HAMAS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) CODEL Smith, accompanied by Ambassador and PolEconOff met with Defense Minister Elias Murr at his residence January 30. CODEL members were House Armed Service Committee members Adam Smith (D-WA), Susan Davis (D-CA), Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ), Glynn Nye (D-VA), Frank Kravotil (D-MD); C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger (D-MD) from the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and Ted Poe (R-TX) of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

2. (C) Representatives, noting Murr's January 28 trip to Syria, queried him about Lebanon's relationship with Syria and regional dynamics involving Syria, Iran, and Hizballah. For his part, Murr encouraged the U.S. to talk directly with all actors. He noted, however, that Syria would drag its feet in any negotiations, allowing Iran to proceed with developing a nuclear program. Murr described Hizballah and Hamas as, from the Syrian perspective, "untouchable" in any negotiations between the U.S., Israel, and Syria. Murr said increased U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces was the best way to counter Hizballah in Lebanon. He said that before Lebanon entered into talks with Israel, ongoing Syrian-Israeli peace talks would have to prove Syria serious about finding a solution. End summary.

TALKING TECHNICALITIES IN SYRIA

3. (C) During a January 30 meeting with visiting CODEL Smith, Minister of Defense Elias Murr expressed pleasure at the "perfect" protocol with which the Syrians treated him during his January 28 trip to Damascus. Murr noted that his trip was the first time a Lebanese Minister of Defense had visited Syria as an independent leader in a sovereign Lebanese state, not as a Syrian minion. Murr also said he was surprised that the Chief of Staff of the Syrian army was prepared to discuss the technicalities of Lebanon and Syria's border issues. After their nearly three-hour meeting, the two agreed to establish checkpoints along the border, 300 to be operated by the Syrians -- whose army numbers nearly one million soldiers -- and 82 by the Lebanese.

4. (C) According to Murr, the Lebanese were "tough" in their

negotiating stance on the Palestinian camps which straddle the Lebanese-Syrian border. Murr said he intends to build a wall around the Lebanese side of these camps, with gates operated by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to prevent free movement into the country. Murr said Syrian President Bashar Asad, whom Murr also met, refused to acknowledge that weapons came from Syria, passed through the border camps, and ended up in Lebanon. Murr said a joint Syrian-Lebanese team would be tasked to find a solution to the situation of the people living in the camps.

15. (C) Murr expressed hope that, following his meetings in Syria, changes would start to become visible on the ground quickly. (Note: According to press January 29, Murr told Cabinet ministers that Lebanese-Syrian border control arrangements would start the following week, a message he reiterated to CODEL and Ambassador. End note.) Murr plans to brief UN Special Coordinator in Lebanon Michael Williams weekly on border developments. Responding to a question from Rep. Ruppersberger as to why Asad chose to take the noteworthy step of inviting Murr to Damascus now, Murr assessed that Asad was trying to send a message to the international community. Asad was trying to present a new face to the world by treating Lebanon as a sovereign nation, taking steps to address border issues, and making progress on UNSCR 1701.

HIZBALLAH AND HAMAS:  
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16. (C) Responding to a question from Rep. Ruppersberger regarding Asad's stance on Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran, Murr said that, for Asad, his positions on Hizballah and Hamas were non-negotiable. Asad, according to Murr, views Damascus' support of Hamas and harboring of Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal as a "good bet," as it ensures Syria will be a main player in negotiations in the region. On Hizballah, Murr recounted that Asad was clear during his meeting with Murr that Hizballah was much more than just an important ally, but was "part of Syria;" any attempt to diminish Hizballah would lead to "another May 7," when Hizballah turned its weapons on Lebanese and initiated fighting in Beirut. Rep. Smith expressed concern about this stance and opined that Asad would have to change his viewpoint for any negotiations with the U.S. to be fruitful.

17. (C) Murr told Rep. Ruppersberger, who asked where Iran fit into the puzzle, that Asad's ideal scenario was negotiations with Israel and the U.S. with Turkish mediation. Asad's real goal, however, was not a solution, but a long drawn-out process that would enable Iran to continue developing its nuclear weapons program. In Murr's assessment, Asad currently "cannot afford" to split with Iran or make peace with Israel. Asad enjoys military and financial assistance from Iran, and the two share the "essential cards" of Hamas and Hizballah. Murr noted, however, that Iran and Syria were not partners. Responding to a question from Rep. Smith regarding Syria and Iran's relationship if Iran were to become a nuclear power, Murr assessed that Syria would be unafraid of becoming second-fiddle to Iran. Asad assumes his "cards" -- which include Lebanon, a country Murr said Asad views as "in his pocket" -- ensure him a position of authority.

18. (C) Rep. Smith asked Murr how the U.S. could be helpful regarding Hizballah, to which Murr reiterated the need for a strong Lebanese army to counter Hizballah's claims of defending Lebanon. Murr requested Representatives' help in getting Lebanon "more serious" aid and more sophisticated weaponry for the LAF. Murr said that the LAF would eventually take over Hizballah's weapons. The LAF had proven itself during the 2007 fighting against Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr el-Barid Palestinian camp, he said, and would remain a

unified force in the face of difficult situations, such as disarming Hizballah. Responding to a question from Rep. Kravotil on what the U.S. could do to stop the re-supply of Hizballah's weapons, Murr replied, "nothing."

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PEACE NEEDS SYRIA  
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¶9. (C) Rep. Smith asked Murr about Lebanon's future relationship with Israel. Murr said that following the 2006 fighting between Hizballah and Israel, Lebanon has retained contact with Israel through regular LAF meetings with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on border issues. He described the dispute over the status of the border town of Ghajjar as a "minor issue" and assessed that disagreements between the two countries would require only three weeks for resolution. Therefore, Murr said the peace process between Israel and Syrian would have to begin first, and continue for six months, before Lebanon would enter into talks with Israel. Lebanon would have to see that the Syrians were serious about peace before joining in any negotiations.

COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Although Murr did not mention any discussion of internal Lebanese politics during his trip to Syria, some local observers, noting his "unscheduled" meeting with Asad, believe one purpose of the trip was to push Murr towards the camp of Michel Aoun. Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement is threatened especially by the prospect of an independent, but anti-Aoun bloc, headed by Michel Murr, Elias' father, and probably hopes to pry Elias away from association with such a grouping. End comment.

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